PERSONAL AND NATIONAL DESTINIES IN INDEPENDENT INDIA

A STUDY OF SELECT INDIAN ENGLISH NOVELS

SYNOPSIS OF Ph.D. THESIS

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SYNOPSIS

This is a synopsis of the thesis entitled "*Personal and National destinies in Independent India: A Study of select Indian English Novels*". The Indian English novel has always directly or indirectly engaged with contemporary social, political and economic realities. In this context, this thesis focuses on how the life and destiny of the individual and the life and destiny of the nation-state in post-independence India, are presented as being intricately intertwined in select novels by select Indian English novelists.

The need for such a study is attested to by several significant facts. At the outset, historians and scholars are unanimous about the marked paucity of comprehensive studies on the socio-political history of post-independence India, especially from the perspective of and documenting the contribution of the masses. Secondly, the Indian novel in English has always been a faithful mirror of changing individual and national lives and sensibilities, deeply concerned with the nation's destiny. Thirdly, the novels selected for this study have been published in the 1990s and after. The Indian English fiction of this period deserves greater analysis not only for its foregrounding of the Indian experience on the global stage, but also for its deeper amalgamation of personal and national histories and its rewriting of contemporary history from the viewpoint of the marginalised. The post-1990 era is a turning point in Indian history marked by the influence of economic liberalisation and globalisation and by the involvement of the citizen as a more active agent on the national scene. Hence, this era offers a vantage point for an objective view of the nation since independence.

The novels selected for the study present a wide cross-section of Indian national life from 1947 to date. They are- Gurcharan Das' *A Fine Family* (1990), Arun Joshi's *The City and The River* (1990), Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995), Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), Meher Pestonji's *Pervez-A Novel* (2002), Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), Vikas Swarup's *Q & A* (2006) and *Six Suspects* (2008), David Davidar*'s The Solitude of Emperors* (2007), Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* (2008) and, Tarun Tejpal's *The Story Of My Assassins* (2009). These novels encompass almost the whole of India from North to South and East to West, from villages to metropolises. They comprehensively depict varied epochs in Indian history from

Partition and Independence to the latest national developments. Their protagonists who live in the shadow of or directly engage with these national events are men, women and children, ruling elites and poor masses, minorities, subaltern groups and middle-classes. The common strand uniting these novelists is the conscious use of national history and the fine balance of the private and the public, rooted in their own deep involvement with national issues.

The objective is to examine and evaluate, with reference to these novels, the intermingling of the personal and the national, the presentation of national history, the roles of citizen and government, post-colonial issues, and the role of literature in national life. The analysis of the novels has been classified according to their delineation of different periods of the history of independent India. Each chapter critiques specific novels from three broad angles: The Personal and The National, Documenting National History, and The Artistic Perspective.

Chapter I attempts to explain the idea behind the study and its core objectives. The fundamentals of the thesis topic- human life and politics, the nation, the state, the government, the citizen, civil society - are briefly outlined. The story of India is summarised with regard to Indian history, colonial rule, freedom movement, the independent Indian nation-state, the Constitution of India and the idea of Indian democracy. The literary context of the study is elucidated with a brief discussion of Indian English novels connecting national history and individual lives, beginning from the late nineteenth century to the present. The selected novels are classified thematically and chronologically with reference to the various epochs in post-independence Indian national history and a brief outline plan of the thesis is presented. Finally, the relevance of the study is considered.

Chapter II deals with two novels that chronicle Indian history chiefly from Partition and independence in 1947 to the national Emergency of 1975-1977. Thinker and writer Gurcharan Das' *A Fine Family* views the saga of the freedom struggle, of nation-building in the 1950s and 1960s and the turbulent 1970s is seen through the eyes of several generations of middle-class Partition refugees. Gurcharan Das attaches great significance to the family as a basic unit of the nation-state and reiterates the role of the middle-classes in nation-building. Rohinton Mistry, acclaimed Canada-based Parsi novelist, sets his strongly political and satirical novel *A Fine Balance* in the dark years of the Emergency. Even as it graphically portrays government atrocities from the perspective of the downtrodden, the novel attains universality in its empathy for the struggle of the marginalised against societal and

governmental tyranny. Thus, these two novels comprehensively depict the interface between private and public lives in the nation-state in-the-making, from the 1940s to the 1970s.

Chapter III analyses Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) that focus on the regional microcosms wherein the turbulent geo-politics of the sixties, seventies and eighties was played out. Booker Prize winning novelist and fiery activist Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is set in the 1960s and 1970s. It focuses on the impact of political forces and casteist orthodoxy on a remote South Indian village. It depicts subalterns grappling with repressive societal and governmental forces and rewrites conventional history from the perspective of women and lower castes. Roy's documentation of the politics of Communist Kerala analyses how political movements for equality betrayed the masses. Kiran Desai, another Booker winner and diasporic writer, in her *The Inheritance of Loss* deals with life in the underdeveloped, volatile North-Eastern regions during the 1960s to 1980s. Set against the Gorkha insurgency, it mirrors the secessionisms that threatened to shatter India and traces them to regional disparities and administrative failures. It also deals with the painful illegal migration of the unemployed to the West. Kiran Desai captures the torment and undying spirit of citizens caught between ethnic conflicts and post-colonial dilemmas and seeks justice for the voiceless. Thus, these two novelists look inward into the remotest rural regions and examine the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s ridden by agricultural and industrial crises, famine, unemployment, regionalism and extremism.

Chapter IV focuses on two novels that capture the essence of the nineties - the urban dilemma caused by the simultaneous advent of economic liberalization and deadly communal politics on the national scene. Meher Pestonji's *Pervez-A Novel* (2002) is the fictional autobiography of a veteran social activist and journalist which unravels Bombay against the backdrop of the Ayodhya crisis and the 1992- 1993 riots. Pestonji voices the agony of riot-victims, castigates the ruling elite and underlines the role of the civil society in preserving secularism. Her heroine Pervez exemplifies how both the individual and the national scene are transformed through mutual involvement. Famous editor-publisher David Davidar's *The Solitude of Emperors* (2007) narrates the tale of a young journalist who starts his career in Bombay, amid the maelstrom of the 1992- 1993 riots. While focusing on the martyrdom of a social outcaste for peace, Davidar condemns the government machinery, media and elites for their sins of omission. Even as he portrays hypocritical new-age fundamentalist politicians,

he advocates inculcation of civic consciousness among the youth. Thus, these two novels chronicle the struggle of the urban citizens against communal politics and divisive forces.

Chapter V deals with four novels that together depict India in the new millennium - top diplomat Vikas Swarup's *Q&A* (2006) and *Six Suspects* (2008), Aravind Adiga's Booker-winning *The White Tiger* (2008) and firebrand investigative journalist Tarun Tejpal's *The Story of my Assassins* (2009). The setting is present-day India, marked by incredible progress, appalling poverty and a decaying polity. Citizens from every walk of life cutting across barriers of age, gender, class, caste and creed, shape and are shaped by the changing contours of the Indian nation-state. In *Q&A*, an eighteen year-old slum-kid becomes the spokesperson of a cosmic view of India. *Six Suspects*, a crime thriller becomes a comprehensive picture of the varied spheres of national life that have degenerated into fiefdoms of unscrupulous ruling elites. Vikas Swarup, firmly with those who inhabit the underbelly of modern India, rages against the abuse of power. Adiga's *The White Tiger* exposes the ugliness of India Shining. The journey of the penniless rural protagonist to become a business tycoon after slaying his rich master reveals the new rules for success in an India gridlocked in corruption, greed and inequality. Adiga fires a salvo on behalf of the large raging mass of have-nots who are conveniently eluded from India's growth story. Tarun Tejpal's *The Story Of My Assassins* is the multi-layered tale of an attempt on the life of a journalist who has exposed corruption in the highest levels of governance. The life stories of those arrested for the assassination attempt mirror the downtrodden forced into crime by injustice. Tejpal incorporates the massive divides of class and caste, the dark politics of northern India and the decadent state machinery, media and corporates.

Chapter VI critiques two novels concerned with a vision for the future of the nation. These do not point to a specific territory or time-period, but are extremely suggestive of Indian realities and the role of the Indian citizen. Acclaimed playwright and versatile artist Manjula Padmanabhan's novel *Escape* (2008), about a dystopia marked by the tyranny of cloned Generals, extermination of women, and ultra-modern nuclear technology, is a powerful portent. It is a scathing indictment of neo-colonial policies of governance which choose tyranny over liberty, the rich over the poor and divorce development and technology from freedom and ecological conservation. Padmanabhan's emphasis is on the self-awakening of the woman and other subalterns, who must craft their own destiny and that of the nation.

Sahitya Akademi Award winning novelist late Arun Joshi is famous for his psychological and philosophical fiction. His *The City and the River* (1990), a powerful political allegory analyzes the roles of the rulers and the ruled in modern nation-states and attempts to resolve the existential crisis of the nation. It attaches great value to the reformatory and ethical role of the fearless citizen. Joshi's unique philosophy of idealism, self-sacrifice and self-purification is a return to the vision of the founding fathers of the Indian nation. Thus, these two novels are an allegory for the past, present and future, predicting the possibilities of the post-modern nation-state and preparing the citizen to face these challenges and establish a just, humane, progressive state. While *Escape* visualises the dangerous future that the nation would have to face if current shortcomings are not rectified, *The City and The River* offers a lasting solution for personal and national salvation.

Chapter VII sums up how each of the eleven selected novelists presents a comprehensive picture of the interface between personal and national lives in post-independence India. Their visions for the nation are summarized. It is illustrated how the selected novels function as intimate chronicles of the modern Indian nation-state. They follow the workings of Indian democracy and assess the functioning of state machinery and public institutions in India. They critique objectively the successes and failures of citizens and governments. Each of the novels focuses on those citizens who have been traditionally sidelined from the national mainstream. They trace national failures to the changing value systems of Indian society and advocate a return to integrity in personal and public lives. Above all, rooted in the deep involvement of the novelists with social issues, the selected novels exemplify the role of literature in national life. The last chapter concludes with a brief assessment of the successes and failures of the Indian nation-state and suggestions on how it can rise to its full potential.

To sum up, the selected novelists try to grasp the grand narrative of India with empathy, honesty and precision, carefully balancing art and realism. They testify to the heroism and resilience of the masses and advocate a humane, cosmopolitan nation-state. They represent an era of anxiety and interrogation, an attempt to keep the soul of the nation alive.